

Marianne DeMarco

COMM

Media & Culture

## **Government and the Media**

Throughout history, the United States government has had a love/hate relationship with the media. Throughout history, the media has evolved over time from the printed word, mainly in form of newspapers, to radio to television, and now includes the Internet. These various forms of media have played an important role in the birth of our nation, as well as, the development of many important movements in this country including civil rights and gender equality. Along with this adverse relationship between the media and government comes a long history of propaganda and yellow journalism. With the advent of technology, the media has developed into an entirely newly evolved industry, completely different from how it originated in the early stages of American culture. Today, the government and media hold a symbiotic relationship without which neither would thrive.

The printed word, in the form of newspapers, was the earliest form of traditional media in the United States. Early colonials struggling to establish themselves choose to create newspapers as a form of expression. In the early days of this country, the government suppressed the original proponents of the media in its earliest form, the newspaper. However, eventually newspapers were heavily supported and subsidized by the federal government.

The first American newspaper was published in 1690. Since this time, journalists have always struggled for the right to free press. Richard Pierce, the author of this first paper, was arrested. This led to the publications of government subsidized papers, like the Boston Newsletter. "Colonial Era papers were typically 4-page weeklies containing local ads, short paragraphs of local hearsay, and large, unedited chunks of European political and economic news from the London press. Political news of other colonies rarely appeared; local political news was scarce until the 1760's. Articles in colonial papers, brilliantly conceived by revolutionary propagandists, were a major force that influenced public opinion in America from reconciliation with England to full political independence. As conflict with England grew intense, colonial printers were compelled to choose sides." (Moyers)

As the colonists struggled to receive their independence from England, the media continued to play a key role in the independence of our country. That was the beginning of publishers having to choose sides politically. Many publishers throughout the 1700 and 1800's were put on trial. John Peter Zenger was arrested for allegedly using sarcasm to ridicule the governor of New York. In 1776, the colonists declared their independence from England. However, it takes almost thirty years until the government officially supports freedom of the press in the Bill of Rights. Amendment One in the Bill of Rights gives all American's the right to Freedom of the Press. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right

of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." (Moyers)

In the 1800's, newspapers like the New York Sun and the New York Tribune began to have large audiences. Newspapers were quite different in the 1800's. Even in the early stages of the media, technology played a major role. Technology brought down the cost of printing. Lowering the cost of printing increased the number of circulation. And, as circulation numbers increased so did the profits. In addition, "As politics heated up in this decade, more than fifty papers hired Washington correspondents, most of whom wrote for multiple papers and often held additional jobs as clerks for congressional committees or speechwriters for politicians." (Moyers) We see a similar overlap today, as many correspondents for the major news stations also hold government positions. Another concept that we see in today's media that begun way back in the 1800's is Yellow Journalism. Two major players in the media at that time, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hertz used the sensationalized type of reporting, called Yellow Journalism, to help to develop the "press as both political agency and business." (Moyers)

The concept of viewing the newspaper industry as a political agency and business and the battle between Pulitzer and Hertz set a bad precedence for years to come. Yellow journalism is (according to dictionary.com) "Journalism that exploits, distorts, or exaggerates the news to create sensations and attract readers." Frank Luther Mott, an American historian "defines yellow journalism in terms of five characteristics: scare headlines in huge print, often of minor news, lavish use of

pictures, or imaginary drawings, use of faked interviews, misleading headlines, pseudo-science, and a parade of false learning from so-called experts, emphasis on full-color Sunday supplements, usually with comic strips (which is now normal in the U.S.), dramatic sympathy with the "underdog" against the system." So many of these characteristics are seen in today's media and are being passed off as legitimate journalism. In the documentary *Outfoxed*, directed by Robert Greenwald, a former Fox News employee describes their "Fox News Alert" as a form of scare tactic used by the New Channel to create a sense of urgency and instill a sense of fear in the viewer. He implies that what originated as a genuine attempt at alert viewers of actual emergencies turned into a form of yellow journalism, using misleading headlines and sounds to mislead the public. The documentary also describes the use of "so-called" experts and how more airtime was given to experts with Republican views. Rupert Murdoch, the media mogul and owner of News Corporation very much resembles William Randolph Hertz and Joseph Pulitzer and their unprofessional and unethical reporting and publishing of the news.

The government has a history of supporting the media. In the late 1700, the government used preferential postal rates in order to encourage the distribution of newspapers. (Moyers) While government has a history of supporting the media, it also has a history of attempting to control the content of the media and what was publishing in colonial America. President John Adams instituted the Sedition Act which made it a crime to print "any false, scandalous and malicious writing...against the government of the United States." (Moyers) This act was later repealed by Thomas Jefferson.

However we see a similar trend when the US Government attempts to regulate the airways as radio began to become a popular medium.

Radio began to really take flight in the 1920's and early 1930's. Radio was an opportunity for "commentators to wax(ed) rhapsodic about the unprecedented access to information that people would have and about radio as an antidote to isolation and a flattener of hierarchy." (Lardner, 99) The major cities were the first to host licensed commercial public radio stations. But just like TV today, there were major corporations that supported these stations. At the time, companies like Bell Telephone, Westinghouse and DeForest Wireless Telegraph were the major players in the industry. However, radio "passed through a long incubation period when it drew most of its capital from the government." (Lardner, 99) As the government struggled to make heads or tails of this new medium, radio became a new avenue of communication for the American people.

Radio just like print newspapers quickly became under the scrutiny of the United States government. President Hoover "came to the conclusion that such a mighty job as connecting a nation to a new communications network would have to be financed by large private interests. By 1923, he was laying down rules that paved the way for the system of national networks and commercial sponsorship that eventually became the norm for in both radio and television." (Lardner, 99) The radio airways eventually came under the control of the FCC, the Federal Communications Commission, while the private sector continued to support it financially. "The Communications Act of 1934, the basic landmark agreement between commercial television and the people of the

United has become the unifying thread of all telecommunications laws since then, establishing the following basic principles: The airways are public property; Commercial broadcasters are licensed to use the airways; The main condition for use will be whether the broadcaster served "the public interest, convenience, and necessity." (Moyers) Although the government declared the airways as public property, they regulated who was licensed to use these public airways. And in 1966, the Freedom of Information Act allows any citizen, including newspaper reporters, to get information from government records. (Moyers)

The advent of television brought about a whole new perspective to the delivery of "news" to the American people. Putting a visual along with the news which is being presented became an integral part of American culture, especially when America was in times of crisis. During the Vietnam War and the Watergate investigation, the television media was deeply involved in these poignant points of American history. In the documentary Fahrenheit 911, the director Michael Moore attempts to show how the Bush administration allegedly attempted to induce a climate of fear amongst Americans immediately following the terrorist attacks on the United States, using the mass media. Moore felt that President Bush used this fear to solicit government support of the War in Iraq. Moore asserts that, in 2003, the American media were proponents of the invasion of Iraq and that they did not provide an accurate or objective analysis of the war itself or the military casualties occurring thereafter. Specific incidents, for example the Anthrax scare, were used to help get Congress to support the passing of the US

Patriot Act, which essentially expanded government power, while infringing on the privacy of the American people.

Everything that we see on television today is essentially owned by 6 major corporations: General Electric, Time Warner, the Walt Disney Company, News Corporation, CBS, and Viacom. The largest being News Corporation, owned and operated by Rupert Murdoch, a right-winged conservative. "News Corporation has been masterful in utilizing its various properties for cross-promotional purposes, and at using its media power to curry influence with public officials worldwide. "Murdoch seems to have Washington in his back pocket," observed one industry analyst after News Corporation received another favorable ruling." (McChesney, 1997) Murdoch owns the conservative...I mean..."fair and balanced" news station, Fox News. In the 2004 documentary *Outfoxed*, the director, Robert Greenwald attempts to bring awareness of this media conglomerate to the American people. Greenwald states "Fox is leading the charge to dumb down the news, and to spend less and less money on news coverage, and bleed it for every possible dollar of profit... which relates to the larger theme of the film: corporate control of the media and the problems it brings up for a democracy." Fox's news manipulation, shocking headlines, scare tactics, and bullying hosts make for one unfair and misbalanced news channel.

The Internet is yet another outlet for the news media. Like all the forms of media that came before, the Internet had the government as one of its early advocates. Al Gore coined the term Information Superhighway, which we today call the World Wide Web or the Internet. When Gore was a senator, he helped to develop the High

Performance Computing and Communication Act of 1991. Today, the Internet is a major player local governments. According to the article, "*Local Governments Join in the Online Media Fun,*" cities from "Chicago to the little town of South Sioux City, Nebraska, governments are posting videos for their constituencies – and the world – to see." The article states that the Mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley has created his own YouTube channel as a way to stay connected. Chicago is not the only town to do this. "South Sioux City, Nebraska has been publishing an average of two videos a month for the past two years, and has been exclusively posting them on YouTube for about nine months." (Brock, 2009) The Internet used to be mostly for young people and the technologically savvy. However, today the Internet is being used by a vast majority. Not only commercially popular, it has "provided an exciting new arena for exchange of information between the government and the governed, or between one activist and another." (Straw, 2010) The US government's website - <http://www.usa.gov/> is a major source of information for the American people. The Internet has given access to information that was previously unavailable or difficult to obtain. Not only does the Internet help to bring awareness to the citizens of this country, but this ability also gives the American people the capacity to become more and more in their local and federal government.

Member of the United States government have also used the Internet as a vehicle to assist in campaigning. And, other countries are starting to take notice. Both major parties in England were obviously inspired by Barack Obama's presidential campaign. The Labour party has begun to collect tens of thousands of email addresses

in hopes to encourage activism that will help with the movements of their party.

(Straw, 2010) Will Straw warns in his article, "*Beware the Power of the Tweet*," that "Blogs, tweets and Facebook are actually more likely to be what loses a party the election than what wins it." This was evident in such instances for example, Howard Dean's reaction to his 3rd place finish in the 2004 Iowa Caucus. Dean's scream became not only a television sensation, but also overnight became "viral" on the Internet.

Social Networking is a specific area of the Internet that the American media is also involved in. Social networking sites are specific websites on the Internet where a type of online community is established. Typically users have a profile that is available for other users to view and there are forums where users can interact. Social networking is one arena of the Internet that the government has also taken a liking to. Sites, like Facebook and twitter, have become a major part of American culture and therefore a major part of the government. Government officials are using social networking sites to create awareness about their government policy as well as to promote positive support for themselves. Social networking sites, such as <http://govtwit.com/>, are devoted providing access to twitter users who would like to receive short messages from their local and federal government officials, whom also subscribe to this site. Government officials, including President Barack Obama, have used social networking, not only in their campaigning but in continuing to receive support post election. President Obama has 8,149,560 fans on Facebook...and counting. He posts updates to his fans. For example, his most recent post "One year ago our country faced a potentially devastating crisis in our auto industry. Today, the

outlook is very different; the industry is recovering at a pace few thought possible," which links to a weekly address on YouTube, which describes good news from the auto industry.

Whether is it newspapers, radio, television or the Internet each of these very important medium rely on a certain level of journalistic integrity that it somewhat lacking in today's media. An editorial in the Columbian Journal Review states that journalism is losing its reporters. "The New York Times, itself a chief purveyor of conventional wisdom, said as much in a March 9 analysis that claimed the "accuracy rate" has plummeted to "new lows." (Who Will Tell Us?, 2008) Throughout the years journalism has taken different forms whether it is in print, television or on the computer. Americans have to take responsibility for themselves and view each one of these sources with a discerning eye. Each one of us is accountable for the news media that we take in on a daily basis.

These sources are becoming increasingly unreliable. "What one can say definitively is that conventional wisdom is vulnerable in large part because it is often based on imperfect and incomplete information; and that the source of the vast majority of that information – reporting by mainstream news outlets – is under assault as never before." (Who Will Tell Us?, 2008) Much of what we see on television or read in the newspaper or on the Internet is all coming from the same general sources; however, it being sensationalized in order to sell advertisements or get better ratings. "In print, broadcast and elsewhere, more effort is moving to packaging and repurposing

material...But less is being devoted to original newsgathering, especially the bearing witness and monitoring of basic news." (Who Will Tell Us?, 2008)

News on the Internet is becoming overflowing with Bloggers. These bloggers may or may not have legitimate credentials. Your average visitor may tend to believe anything that they read on those blogs. But just like the other forms of media, reader needs to be concerned with the facts behind what they are readings. It is important to look at the sources behind the story and also to look at both side of the story. There is a real concern that the availability of the news on the Internet will put an end to our original print media, the newspaper. "Daily newspapers still employ almost all the people who are, at least occasionally, ding the independent "truth-to-power" journalism that is essential to a free society." (Collum, 2009) Without these daily newspapers, it is a concern that we will never again have accurate reporting of the news.

Along with these bloggers comes political satire. Political satire has become so popular in today's media. NBC's comedy show "Saturday Night Live" was one of the very first shows to deliver political satire. "Three decades ago "S.N.L." was unique, but even then it was not always daring or brilliant; even the earliest episodes had many boring or lame conceits." (Stanley, 2006) Television shows today have become much more daring in their parodies when it comes to the government policies and officials. In addition, we are living in a society that has become so dependent on instant gratification that weekly shows like Saturday Night Live or Real Time with Bill Maher just aren't fast enough. Comedy Central's political satire shows, "The Daily Show with

Jon Stewart" and the Colbert Report have taken on a cult following of viewers. These shows offer an alternative view to the so-called news. Jon Stewart is quoted as saying, "If you watch the news and don't like it, then this is your counter program to the news." And these shows are not just for young people. Jon Stewart has had a number of noteworthy guests on his program, from Barack Obama during his 2008 campaign for President to Bill & Hillary Clinton, Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Al Gore, former Vice President of the United States. He has had 19 United State Cabinet Members, innumerable members of the US Senate and House of Representatives, governors, mayors and various other political figures. In his 2004 book, "America (The Book), " Stewart attempts to define the news media's role in democracy, "The role of a free press is to be the people's eyes and ears, providing not just information but access, insight and most importantly context." Stewart and company have seemed to have found a niche in the genre of comedy and filled a void for many Americans.

With technology being the way it is today, a responsible citizen should be responsible for gathering their news responsibly. The saying "Don't believe everything that you read" still rings true. Always investigate both sides of a story. Know the sources of the articles that you are reading. The Internet is filled with some great content and some not so great. News aggregators have become a popular way of distributing news to a large amount of readers. A news aggregator, also sometimes called a feed reader, news reader, RSS reader or simply an aggregator is, a type of web application which generates syndicated web content such as headlines, blogs, podcasts,

and video blogs in a single location for easy viewing. Google reader and MyYahoo are two popular news aggregators. These types of applications are becoming a more and more widely used by people who get their news from the Internet.

And with the popularity of mobile technology this immediate gratification that American's have will simply not get any better. News stories need to be developed, researched and delivered in a matter of mere minutes. And what does that say for the quality of the journalism that is going in to each and every story. In addition, the line of what qualifies for a valid news story is becoming greyer and greyer. In the documentary Outfoxed, one reporter describes how a celebrity story on "Benifer" also known as the relationship between actor Ben Affleck and actress Jennifer Gardner was passed off as a legitimate news story. And, we are finding that more and more. Celebrity news is no longer for just for gossip shows like Access Hollywood or TMZ, these "news" stories are appearing everywhere, including the evening news.

And what does that say about our country. "Thomas Jefferson famously wrote that given a choice between a society with no newspapers and a society with no government, he would choose the latter." (Collum, 2009) The media is such a large part of American culture. Without a strong media, America would not be what it is today. We the people...need to re-take control of the American media. We need to demand the utmost quality from our journalists and news commentators. All forms of the media including newspapers, radio, television and now the Internet played an integral part in the development of our nation. In the years to come, media will

continue to play an important role in government and I, for one, would like to see a return to the days of journalism with truth, honor and integrity.

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